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What She Became?

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WHAT SHE BECAME? is a thesis comprised of a thirteen-page introduction and 35 poems. As is evident from the title, the poems are about the poet's unsettling personal and creative journey, as well as her personal movements, her traumatic childhood, her individual and cultural backgrounds. The author takes her readers through the experiences of women in war-torn Iraqi Kurdistan from the early 80s to the present day. Her poetry gives you a glimpse of life under a patriarchal regime that attempts to stifle women's voices. The introduction dives deeper into her own personal history as a female Kurdish writer, draws close attention to connections between individual/family trauma and collective/historical trauma. Samples of some of the poems are included here.

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Introduction

I have started weaving creative ideas for this thesis quite a while ago, beginning from personal experiences that are the driving force of the central aesthetic and political questions in my work: the extent to which personal narratives of trauma can be effective in overcoming women's exclusion and discrimination. Or, put differently, voicing trauma sheds a new light on current sociocultural issues that are particularly relevant to marginalized women in post-conflict societies.

Within conflict zones around the world, women are often depicted as victims, when they are discussed at all. There is something about protecting the motherland and by default, women, that makes conflict mainly about men. My poems attempt to ask these questions: What if women were to break silences and share their own feelings about wars or violence? How would their portrayals be different? How would they have an impact on the nation and national identity?

I. My Mind Started to Journey Early, Leaving My Body Behind

When I was in primary school I was a very quiet child. I heard my mom so many times telling her female neighbours and relatives that I was not a physically active child. They suggested that I would understand their conversation about me. My mom would reply that I wouldn't. I did. I understood everything. I felt bad about it. My siblings heard it from my mom and believed as well that I was lazy. They made many jokes about me comparing me to a sheep. Maybe part of me was a sheep. I was not moving around a lot like other children. But I was also a daydreamer. I listened to the adults' conversations about life, their children, war,

violence, suicide, rape and so on. It was of course difficult to piece together everything, but these created a myriad of complex questions in my young and curious mind. Suddenly my mind became a rebel and decided to detach itself from my body and search for answers. I started reading books from a very young age. After the Gulf War and Kurdish Uprising it was really hard to find books. But luckily two of my aunts were poets. They read and wrote in Kurdish. They used to read their poems to their friends and relatives out loud. I was around eight, I did not exactly know what these poems were about, but I knew they sounded angry to my ears, having something to do with freedom, war and women. I remember how excited I became each time I went to their homes and picked children's poetry books from their library shelves.

Then I started reading novels. I was only nine when I read Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* in Kurdish. I could not piece together the political messages behind the story, but parts about poverty, war and punishment tore my heart. Once I started reading a book, my body would turn into an immovable statue, my head would bend over the book for hours, but my brain freed itself from my immobile body. When my older brother knew about my secret, he tried to hide books from me thinking that I was ignoring my homework. It was true, these stories were more important to me than school tasks, but I did well at school as well. By the time I reached high school I was introduced to many new school friends who were also into reading. Together we would visit local libraries where I found my heaven in an array of literary journals, poetry, historical texts, biographies, and memoirs.

I knew that both my body and my mind wanted to be free. But my body was a prisoner and couldn't escape. My mind found ways to sneak out. It would

stalk on characters of stories, take long walks with Oliver Twist or peek into the door peep holes when lovers lay naked in bed and had sex. But then my body felt lonely. It knew that it could not survive without the help of its mind. It struggled hard to catch up.

II. My Body Wanted to Catch Up

I felt lonely and lost in my early adolescent years. My mind was still exploring new worlds and my body did not want to follow the route laid out by society's expectations. My body was stateless without my mind. But one day I had an epiphany about finding new ways to unshackle my body from traditions and norms that were not working for me. Not only my mind wanted to be free, my body also needed to step out of its comfort zone and face its fears.

> You try to lift the blanket
> but your life is handcuffed,
> so you bury your head
> deep into your pillow again.

The first brave thing I did was when I became a member of an Educational Center for Women at twenty. As a young activist I participated in several workshops and seminars to raise awareness of my post-war community on gender violence and women's discrimination in my region. A few years later I participated in a project, organised by Muli Amaye, head of the English Department at Soran University, and Lancaster University co-investigators, to collect Kurdish women's narratives. The project "Many Woman, Many Words"[1] gave women who had lived through Saddam Hussain's genocide campaign

[1] http://kurdishwomenswords.world

against Kurds, known as Al-Anfal, the opportunity to narrate their own lives, in their own way. Two British writers, Amaye and Graham Mort transformed these narratives into poems for performance. By revisiting women's collective traumatic experiences, I felt that I was paying attention to the collective knowledge that must remain accessible to all. I began to realise that indeed I am part of these narratives and I have to use my voice to excavate fresh perspectives on the scope of war and violence, trauma and healing. It was then that my body could catch up with my mind and they decided to continue the creative journey together. Hence, my poems found themselves involving the interplay between personal, collective and transgenerational trauma.

> Perhaps she never saw
> her husband screaming
> when they buried him alive.
> But we know
> each step she takes feels like
> treading over his beating heart.

Due to some sensitive political and cultural matters, I had to rely on metaphors and symbolism to get around censorship. In January 2016 a young female solicitor's burnt body was found dead in her car in Iraqi Kurdistan. The authorities announced that Zara's death was probably a suicide. Her family, on the other hand, confirmed on TV that Zara was always very happy, passionate, caring and she loved her family; she would never do such a horrible thing to herself. We all watched the dramatic CCTV footage of Zara in our homes when it was released by the police. We watched her as she drove past a gate to return to her apartment, unaware that security guards, the metaphor I used for the system, would fail to protect her from this mysterious accident.

She reached the gate
and the guards were
playing the cards
or else they feared
to see her
running into the unknown.

Many of my poems recount the thoughts and imaginations of my traumatic childhood in post-war Iraqi Kurdistan. War primarily affected us because of our vulnerability and emotional detachment from our parents. We tried to create our own play spaces in the rubble in our neighborhood or school, using burnt equipment and material remnants of war. Some of my poems try to capture the small world of school children who struggle to normalize and rebuild their lives from burnt-out ruins.

Maktab[2] is war-torn
Children still play,
making desks from bricks and stone.

Friends' fingers dipped in fire soot,
drawing birds on cardboard walls.

Trauma is often associated with being present at the site of a trauma-inducing event. My poems are not the only reminders of my childhood trauma. Indeed, these haunting memories visit me at any moment in my life and pop up in various circumstances. Darkness reminds me of many things: displacement, shortage of electricity, hungry cats, cold, abandoned houses and so on. Even when I am kissing my lover another image pops up.

[2] School

Suddenly it's the cat
that used to visit you
in the dark, in Bakhtaran camps.
It was skinny as sniffing children
lying next to you.

Each night it would take something away,
your bread, your food, your breath.

War creates hunger and poverty. However, for Kurdish people it has always been easy to rely on mountains' natural food such as wild berries, edible plants, nuts, mushrooms and even seeds. But after the war nothing remained natural anymore. Even after the conflict was over, realities of war still lingered. Our mountains and landscapes became filled with landmines and explosive remnants of war. But this did not stop our poverty and famine stricken families from exploring the outside world for food.

When I was a first grader and my dad used to drive us to the border areas where thousands of landmines were buried from the time of Iraq-Iran war. My dad was a former employee in the road construction sector; therefore he knew most safe places among its thick jungles and rugged mountains. He would guide us where to stay and where was safe to look for rhubarb or *Kardi* (Arum plant).

In the mid April of 1992,
dad's old jeep
takes us to the Zagros mountains
that look heavy, pregnant
with mines, corpses, hopes.

He points to some spots

where we can safely wander.

Back then we were only kids. We were curious and super mobile, too young to understand “unsafe.” My little brother picked things up from the floor, put them in his mouth. They could have been anything: cartilages, remnants of war, canteen snap buttons, or any other soldiers’ belongings. On our way back we would hear grown ups say that they stumbled on skeletons inside their torn solder uniforms, how their boots were still connected to their worn pant legs.

Little brother’s eating dirt or something:
a button fallen from a uniform,
a bullet that tastes of blood and rust,
or a tattered heart pendant.

We scatter like foragers,
stepping over
clothes on skeleton hangers,
our ravenous eyes looking for rhubarb.

War left deep emotional wounds in us. In most wars that happened in Kurdish regions, men faced a higher death rate than women. This had an enormous impact on women’s lives both in the loss but also apart from being casualties of sexual assaults and violence, they were responsible for putting their families together, providing supplies and care for the survivors. This strongly applies to a stateless nation that has been displaced internally and externally several times. Therefore, some of my poems bear witness to the personal and collective experiences of women’s challenges in post-war Iraqi Kurdistan.

Like many Middle Eastern countries, a significant number of girls marry at an early age. By the time I earned my bachelor's degree, apart from me, most of my high school and undergraduate friends were married. But before the widespread emergence of social media, we used to organise small school or college reunions among ourselves in which we talked about our social and professional lives after graduation. In the beginning they would look on my ring finger with disappointment on their faces and encourage me to find myself a man and get married. Then they would gossip and complain about their husbands or their friends' husbands while their children played together in the front yard. I would stare deeply into their faces and imagine what it would be like if one of them was my daughter. I, who was traumatized with silencing words and customs by a patriarchal society at a very early age, was still holding fears of having a daughter who might inherit silence from me.

> …sweet smiles, silk threads of drool
> stream down from their chins.
> Running around in their soft soles.
>
> I keep staring at their faces,
> which look exactly like their moms',
> fearing that one day my daughter
> may inherit my mummified mouth.

My friends didn't seem to know that I have become a rebel. I refused to think of having children. What if it was a girl? Did my friends know the price of introducing a daughter to a society that places rigid gender expectations on girls from a young age?

When I was in sixth grade I had a friend who would tell me the tragic story of her 14 year-old sister several times on our way to school. Each time I heard the story I would naively ask Bana: "what was your sister's crime?" I wished she could give me a better explanation than just the word "namus."[3] But we were both too young to know what "namus" meant. When I grew up I knew that Bana's pregnant sister was murdered by her family after she was raped and impregnated by a married man. A few years after this accident, another woman in our neighbourhood became the victim of "honor killing" as she was killed by her husband, leaving two young beautiful girls behind. One of the girls, Ava, was of the same age as me. I heard her many times saying that her mother deserved to be killed because she was a slut. She believed what the elders had told her about her mother. Now, twenty years has passed from her mother's murder, I and Ava are still friends. When we talk to each other Ava always says she will never forgive her dad for killing her innocent mother.

That day when her soft hands
could not shield the bullets
from piercing her skull,
I heard children saying
that she was a slut,
that's why they didn't make her a funeral.

I believed them,
until I grew up…

Only three decades after Kurdistan got its semi-autonomy, the Islamic State known as Daesh invaded some areas in Iraqi Kurdistan, forcing thousands of

[3] Kurdish word for honor.

Yezidi women into slavery, among which three thousand of them remained enslaved for a number of years. After 2014 a great number of displaced Yazidis, Arabs and Syrian Kurds were settled in my region. I worked for non-governmental organizations as an educator. This gave me the opportunity to mix with Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and refugee communities, especially Yazidi women and girls, listen to their tragic stories of their violence, rape kidnaping and escape. Sometimes they would burst into tears when they mentioned the names of their female relatives and friends who were still in captivity. This experience made me write about Yazidi women's horrifying stories and the freezing conditions of refugees in camps, the way their girls are sold in the auction market.

This time the buyer
chose *Virgin Beautiful*
in the auction market.

They name all types:
a 13 year old,
a *mother,*
her daughter,
and three thousand more.

The miseries of immigrants were not over after they escaped war. Each time I returned home from camps, I would think about their stories and write them in my diary. The immigrants would often ask me what is the purpose of my visit. I would answer them "education." Then they would tell me the list of things they needed: "clothes, fruit, milk for their little sister, a jacket for grandma, a wheelchair for Basma, medicine for Alia's mother." Then another teenage girl

would interrupt and tell me that she has nightmares causing her sleeping issues. Her school friend Tania was still missing after the Islamic State captured her. Other boys would interrupt the girl, reach out to my arm: “Miss, Miss, Miss! Could you please get us a ball? We are good at playing football.” Each time I read my diary, a new poem is born. Of course it is not that easy to portray immigrants’ surreal world, but I try to show their living conditions through simple daily examples.

January air is leaking through
their wall cracks

Miran stares deep into
his mom’s hands
as she repairs tears in his socks.

Themes of home, displacement and intergenerational trauma are inseparable from my writings. I owe my deep passion for my home and heritage to my grandmother whose stories of displacement, migration and oppression inspire me everyday. Even though my grandmother’s displacement occurred more than a century ago, with today's political climate, her accounts no longer feel so distant. Her voice is still fresh in my ears as if she has come back to life and turned into immigrant again:

> *We were around sixty people from all ages: men, women and children. We all left our village, I was only 14 then. It was illegal to travel without permission. We had to sneak across borders, mountains, forests and rivers. Our feet were swollen. My yellow dress was turned into a dirty mop. Women tied their babies on their backs and stepped quietly. Slowly, we were reducing in number. I remember well when we had to stop at some spots; they would dig a hole and throw the dead body into it. Mostly,*

> *we lost kids and elderly ones. Sometimes people were generous with us and gave us food and place to spend the night in. Other times, they would have disgusted looks at us and point their index fingers and shout: "Look, dirty gypsies!"*

Even now, for me, remembering grandma's stories provokes a kind of timeless charm, nostalgic warm glow. Her narratives taught me important lessons on how to exercise agency and gain necessary survival skills to navigate struggles born of my gender, generation and race.

Those who left became nomads.
Those who stayed
turned into songs, into tales.
She wasn't a tale
She became little Bia.

When she told us these stories,
my grandma,
I could not keep track of the times
she brought us back
from the brink of extinction.

III. Now: Healing My Trauma From The Inside Out

Before starting this thesis I was diagnosed with a diseases I have never heard of. "It is an autoimmune disease affecting your intestines," my gastroenterologist explained. It was the first time my body waged civil war against me. After spending many hours of reading medical papers I have realised that that a significant proportion of patients reported uncommon emotional stress before disease onset. In my latest poems, therefore, I want to illustrate the indescribable nightmare world of trauma.

My body still carries those marks
and one day after some tests
they said that I have more inside:
Your body is waging
a domestic war against you
and it is chronic.

This time I didn't ask them
what chronic meant
Because sometimes a body
holds more answers than words.

When I first arrived in Lincoln, some of my professors and classmates asked me why I chose poetry program and why I wanted to write in English. As I have discussed before it is extremely difficult to write in a post-conflict patriarchal society where a poem could easily cost one their life. I come from a culture where there is too much censorship. Due to these cultural constraints, my poems used to include a great deal of metaphors and symbols. This new creative experience taught me that one can write a poem and always come back to it and play with it. I love to use a style that is simple and straightforward. I do not follow the rules, and most of my poems have no rhyme or rhythm. I enjoy the fluidity and freedom we need in the poetry world.

According to Dunya Mikhail's interview "poetry is not medicine — it's an X-ray. It helps you see the wound and understand it."[4]To me poetry

[4] Mikhail, Dunya"Revisiting Iraq Through The Eyes Of An Exiled Poet." *Morning Edition*. Interviewed by the staff, Washington, DC: National Public Radio, 21 March 2013. Transcript.

works as both. It inspires me to use my memory to create a truth that matters. Recalling the details of my actual lived experience can be both healing and revealing. I write poetry because I know that there is trauma hibernating inside me. It is awake when I am stressed or sad. But poetry releases a great deal of my fears about my past. In her book *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self,* Susan Brison states "trauma shatters one's most fundamental assumptions about the world, including beliefs about our ability to control what happens to us."[5] Therefore the survivors feel extremely desperate in the face of the tragedy or turmoil that is supposed to be fatal. She believes that the development of narrative understanding is extremely crucial in helping the survivor to lead a normal life. Similarly, in her poems Tarfia Faizullah suggests that the best way for human beings to survive to transform both trauma and joy into lyricism and melody. In her poem "Fable of The First Born" the speaker or the poet:

> learns the nature of light
> by revising the dark into song with every
> register of her seven tongues."[6]

To a great extent this rings true for me. My creative writing journey has enabled me to be more in touch with my own feelings and share my

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https://www.npr.org/2013/03/21/174773962/revisiting-iraq-through-the-eyes-of-an-exiled-poet. Accessed 15 March 2020.

[5] Susan J. Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), xii.

[6] Faizullah, Tarfia *Registers of Illuminated Villages.* Kindle ed., (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2018), line 35 to 37.

experiences with many other poets from different nationalities. I was somehow able to portray what it is like to be vulnerable, cold or frightened in severely shattered and war-torn environments.

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What She Became?

Leave

Mount Zozik is numb

under the heavy load of winter.

Below,

maktab[7] is war-torn

Children still play,

making desks from bricks and stone.

Friends' fingers dipped in fire soot,

drawing birds on cardboard walls.

The wall paintings begin to cry out

asking me to leave as far as I can.

[7] School

Never Know

He leans down, his mouth

approaching yours.

You want to close your eyes

and feel his warmth.

Suddenly it's the cat

that used to visit you

in the dark, in Bakhtaran camps.

It was skinny as sniffing children

lying next to you.

Each night it would take something away,

your bread, your food, your breath.

I think last time it wanted your flesh.

You never know.

New Year

January air is leaking through
their wall cracks

Miran stares deep into
his mom's hands
as she repairs tears in his socks.

He listens to the laughter of other kids
who play outside the camp
running around burning tires.

He knows his mom
is good at mending
and darning their torn world.
But he doesn't understand why
sometimes the world seems
out of her control?
Such as that day she couldn't mend
their crushed home,
nor the deep shrapnel hole
through his dad's heart.

Alive

That is what everyone says in our neighbourhood,
there is something weird about
the way Maryam walks.

She walks gently,
each step placed
with care on the ground.

Perhaps she never saw
her husband screaming
when they buried him alive.
But we know
each step she takes feels like
treading over his beating heart.

Vineyard

Each time he is done with spraying,
picking or pruning,
he gazes out on the vineyard
as if the dead will soon get back to life.

Before resettlement
dad drove a shovel truck,
the engine growl
tore through the grey atmosphere,
along mountain slopes
He constructed roads
that sometimes
led to
darkest destinations.

On his way he would see bodies in uniforms,
piles of them.

He had to bury them.
Some of them still groaned,
talking in different languages,
*Mekham bargar*dam
Dagaremawa mal
Urid ahli
Eve gitmek istiyorum

Dad gazes out on the vineyard,
listening to ghosts
who speak in different languages,
begging to be home.

A Body Holds More Answers

Nena [8] said:
this war is getting chronic.
She pointed to the old radio
where the invisible man became louder,
and louder.
Counting the names of the missing,
as though he wanted her to shut up.

"*Nena! What is chronic*?"
She stared into my eyes
but no words came out
of her wounded mouth.
Maybe my voice was not as loud as the man's
or her body wanted to speak for itself .
And when I say body,
I mean her war-marks.

One day grown ups said that it's over.
I was busy
brushing my fingers freely
along those elevated velvet lines
that stretched all across *nena*'s arms.

I didn't take notice of my own.
Assumed they would disappear over time
I covered them religiously for years.
They still hurt.
But each time they were unveiled,
curious glances would eat on my nerves,

[8] Kurdish word for grandma

making me senseless.

War is complicated.
Like my body scars
the story holds multiple layers:
displacement,
fire burning a cradle,
bomber planes dominating the skies,
masking my screams.

My body still carries those marks,
and one day after some internal tests,
they said that I have more inside:
Your body is waging
a domestic war against you,
and it is chronic.

This time I didn’t ask them
what chronic meant.
Because sometimes a body
holds more answers than words.